

Hiring Callers and Musicians

Original post: c.2000s <https://www.cdss.org/organizers-original>

Here are some guidelines for organizers about how to hire bands and callers for your event.

With clear communication and an understanding of performers' and organizers' perspectives, booking can be a straightforward process which lays the groundwork for a successful event. On the other hand, poor communication and divergent expectations can leave a bitter taste in everyone's mouth. To put it another way, performers who feel respected, appreciated, and at ease will do a better job playing, calling, or leading your event, which makes everyone more happy.

Editorial Note: Ethan Hazzard-Watkins wrote this article with input from various people who are both performers and organizers. He has tried to provide some general information that will be widely applicable, as well as my his own opinions about which models he prefers. The aim is to provide thoughts about what benefits and pitfalls you might encounter with different approaches.

THE INITIAL CONTACT

When you are looking to hire someone to play, call, or teach for your event, first you need to identify who you'd like to ask. Information about finding performers in your area is available here, and suggestions about matching performer talents to your needs are below. Assemble a list of performers who fit your needs and then call or email them to get the ball rolling. In your initial contact introduce yourself, explain your role in your group, include a basic description of your event or group and what you are asking performers to do, list the date(s) and times of the event(s) in question, and provide some information about financial arrangements. The rest of this page describes in more detail how to sort all this stuff out.

BOOKING

There are several different models for booking performers:

1. **Broadcast:** Email all the performers you know with the available date(s), find out who is available when, and then piece it all together. This works best for a series, such as a weekly dance, where different combinations of people play together each week. It creates a lot of work for the organizer to put everything together, and assumes that 1) anyone in your performer group is pretty much happy working with anyone else, and 2) the organizer knows a good deal about each performer's strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. I don't recommend this approach for a single event, because only one of the many people you contact is actually going to get the gig, and the others will feel like you offered it to them and then took it away.
2. **Go down the list:** Identify your top choices for performers, and ask them one at a time if they are available and willing to do the gig for what you are paying.
3. **Sub-contract:** Ask one performer to put together a combination for a given event. Tell them the budget they have to work with and any other pertinent info, and give them the freedom to assemble a group they will enjoy.

For most situations option 2 or 3 is best. These methods make performers feel like you are excited about their specific skills and artistic vision, rather than simply looking for whoever can get the job done cheapest or whoever responds first. Whatever your approach, make clear in your initial contact whether you are approaching several bands to find out about availability or talking with one band at a time. Make clear whether you are definitely offering the gig, or just getting information about availability and cost. It's frustrating to think you're being offered a gig (and turning down other work for that same date) and then finding out someone else was hired.

For a dance event, give some consideration to whether bands and callers match in order to allow both to do their best. Don't pair a caller who always does singing squares with a band that's never heard of them; don't pair an old time band with a caller who does a lot of New England Chestnuts; don't pair a caller who does a lot of southern squares with a band that only plays only northern tunes. If you have a caller or band already booked, solicit their input about their favorite people to work with.

If your event is run by committee designate one person to be in contact with the performers, and if possible empower that person to make decisions about pay ranges and hiring. Before you make contact with performers discuss as a committee what you are planning to pay, whether you can pay more if performers ask for it, what performers you want to hire, etc. It is awfully confusing to deal with several different people from an event, or to have one person who really wants your band contact you before being authorized to do so by the group. Performers usually don't want to be involved in internal Committee politics.

However you do it, don't take too long. If performers are holding dates for you it may cost them other potential work, or if they accept other engagements they may no longer be available by the time you figure everything out.

NEGOTIATING PAY

Here are two approaches to negotiating pay:

1. offer what you know you can afford
2. ask performers what they usually charge

With option 1, performers can say "yes" and you're all set; they can say "no" and you can try someone else; or they can say "that's not enough, how about \$X?" and you can negotiate from there.

If you go with option 2, be clear whether you are considering other bands, and, if so, whether price is an issue in your decision. I don't enjoy being put in this position, but if you are asking performers to bid against each other tell them that up front. Then they can respond accordingly.

If your offer is really all you can afford, that gives the performer the opportunity to accept or decline. If you can be flexible, work with the performer to find a fee that everyone feels happy with. It is in everyone's best interest to arrive at a price that makes the performer feel appreciated and adequately compensated, while staying within the budget for the event and making the organizers feel like they are getting a good deal for their money. Some performers have a set fee for a certain kind of event, and in that case the negotiation can be cut and dried. Either you can offer that or you can't. Others don't have a set fee for events, and the decision about whether to accept the gig for a certain amount of pay includes issues like: will we sell a lot of CDs? how easy/difficult is it to get there? will the event provide exposure for us in a new area, or an area where we are likely to get other gigs in the future? is there the potential for a bonus in the event of good attendance? can we plan some other gigs on the same trip to make more money? how fun will the event be? does it look really good on our resume?

Keep in mind that performers will be thinking in terms of pay per person, rather than the overall cost for the entire group. If you are an event with a smaller budget, look for two- or three-piece combos, or ask if a larger band can appear in a scaled down version.

PAY STRUCTURE FOR A ONE NIGHT EVENT

There are lots of ways to structure the way that performers get paid for your event or series. Here are several common methods:

- **Shares:** The proceeds at the door on a given evening are split evenly amongst the performers after covering basic expenses like rent, sound, publicity, etc. A simple formula would look like: $(\text{Gross receipts} - \text{fixed expenses}) / \# \text{ of performers} = 1 \text{ share}$ This means performers benefit from large attendance, and share the risk of a small attendance.
- **Fixed Pay:** The pay is the same per performer regardless of attendance and is set ahead of time. This is common for special events like parties or weddings, events at schools, and some dance series. It makes the finances predictable, and puts the risk of small attendance entirely on the organizers. It doesn't allow performers to benefit if they draw a large crowd.
- **Something complicated:** If your event has a lot of overhead that is not connected to a specific event (insurance costs, publicity, sound system purchase, etc.), if you keep a reserve of funds that you contribute to or draw from depending on the attendance on a given night, or if you have other financial issues to account for, your payment formula might get much more complicated. See below for a sample formula.

Here are some other things to consider:

- **Guarantee:** Most events offer a minimum guaranteed pay per person for performers. This respects the fact that performers do the same amount of work regardless of how many people show up. This is especially important if the performers are traveling a long way. Make sure if you offer a guarantee that you know where the money is coming from in the event of a very small attendance - either you have a reserve of funds to cover it, or the organizer(s) will have to foot the bill.

- **Travel:** Some one night events offer additional travel compensation as a flat rate per vehicle or based on distance traveled.
- **Equal or unequal shares:** Most events offer equal shares to all performers. Some events pay callers a bit more if the band is large (five or more people). Very rarely there are other arrangements about unequal shares.
- **Communicate!** Whatever your arrangement, be very clear ahead of time about how the proceeds will be split. When you contact performers, let them know 1) your guarantee, if any, and 2) your average share for recent dances. This gives them information both about the minimum they can expect and a more likely scenario given average attendance. If you have a cap on performer pay, if you take a substantial cut for the organizers or for the rainy day fund, if you allocate pay unequally, or have any other unusual arrangement, be very clear about that in your communication with performers. You don't need to have a contract, but if you choose to write one for your event make sure all of this information is clearly stated.

Here is the formula for a large contra dance as described in the performer contract:

"Effective April 27, 2007, admission fees go up to \$9. For bands with 4 members or fewer, the caller and musicians equally split \$3.69 per paid admission and are guaranteed a minimum of \$100 each. When the band has 5 or more members, the caller receives 1/5 of \$3.69 per paid admission and is guaranteed a minimum of \$100; the band members split the remaining 4/5 of \$3.69 per paid admission and the band as a whole is guaranteed a minimum of \$400. Lately our dances have been averaging about 200-250 dancers."

In this scenario, the organizing committee takes \$5.31 per paid admission, which covers their costs for rent, sound, publicity, etc. and pays the remainder as equal shares to the performers, unless the band is large, in which case the caller gets a little extra.

If you are unsure about what arrangements are common in your area, ask performers and organizers what they commonly expect. Ask to see samples of contracts from other events, and then decide what will work best for you.

PAY FOR WEEKENDS, FESTIVALS, AND CAMPS

As a guideline, think about \$500 or more per person plus full travel reimbursement (airfare, mileage to and from the airport, parking, and pickup/drop off on your end) for top performers for a dance weekend. If you are not paying everyone the same amount for a similar amount of work at an event, have a good reason for doing so (famous out of town band vs. up-and-coming local band), and be up front about it. No one likes to find out later that they are making a lot less money for equal work. You can also have different gradations of staff positions for people doing more or less work, or people with less experience or name recognition. Some options include full-staff (full pay), half-staff (less pay), or scholarship (free or reduced admission).

Consider including a profit sharing clause in the contract which stipulates if/when you might pay performers a bonus. If your event fills up and you have a surplus of funds, it's nice to share that with performers.

Some weekends or festivals encourage performers to seek other gigs in the area during the same trip, and others forbid this in their contracts. Performers may consider the possibility of other income during the same trip when deciding about the gig. If you have a preference one way or the other, state this up front. If you discourage other work in the area, make sure you are paying enough that the weekend itself is worth it.

If you offer other forms of compensation (a discounted rate for performer's spouse/guest/significant other, daily massages, free beer, whatever) let the performers know about it in your negotiations and include that in your contract.

HAVE A VISION, HIRE ACCORDINGLY

Read about crafting a vision for your event. Hiring the right performers is one of the tools at your disposal to help make your vision a reality. Make sure that you identify performers with appropriate skills to do the things that are important to you, and with an artistic approach that matches your ideas for the event. For example, if welcoming beginners is important to you, make sure you hire callers or teachers who are sensitive to that and willing to adjust their programming accordingly.

It is important to communicate your vision for an event to performers early on, preferably in your initial contact. Describe your goals and tastes, and ask if performers will feel good about being involved. Then you can collaborate to plan an event that will both highlight performers talents and fulfill your goals.

SOUND

Communicating with performers about sound system needs and sound procedures is an important part of a successful event. More info [in separate document... look under sound].

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- How to write a contract (from David Casserly)
- Lisa Greenleaf's article "Hiring Dance Camp Staff - Guidelines for Organizers" (from CDSS News, Sep/Oct 08)
- Carol Ormand's article "Gigs from Heaven" (from CDSS News, Sep/Oct 08)

WRITING A CONTRACT

This guide about how to write contracts for performers comes from David Casserly, Oberlin alum and Harvard Law School student. It focuses on college groups, but can also apply to other groups writing contracts. This guide is not meant to constitute legal advice from CDSS or from David; if you want that, consult a real lawyer.

A contract is a legally binding promise. I personally think it's a good idea to write a contract for every performer that comes to campus. Here are a few things that need to be included in contracts. Keep in mind that each school might have particular requirements for any contract that an agent of that school will sign; Oberlin's student union had to OK every contract by a student organization, and I would imagine most schools have similar processes. Anyways, contracts should have:

- Write "Contract" at the top
- Name and address of the performer, including social security number. If it's a band that has a federal tax ID#, then you can put that number in, along with where the band is incorporated. Make sure it's the legal name of the performer-- in Massachusetts, it doesn't really matter, but in some states, it might
- The date and time of the engagement, including a load-in time and sound-check time
- The description and location of the venue
- A statement of the compensation offered, including a specific mention of whether or not that compensation includes travel. Be sure to mention any non-monetary compensation (e.g., University Contra Dance will provide lunch on the afternoon of the engagement).
- Who will provide sound reinforcement
- A liability statement (check with your college about this-- usually the college will want a statement making it clear that it's the boss of any of its premises, and that it is liable for any damages in premises, etc.. One of the nice things about having a dance in a college is that the college can assume liability, so you don't have to worry about insurance if your school lets you put a statement like this in).
- Signatures and dates of all parties (it wouldn't hurt to have both you, and a representative of the college sign it)
- Be sure to remember that, if you sign a contract, you are legally obligated to make good on that promise. In other words, you have to pay the performer. Only write a contract if you're sure that those are the terms that you want. If you aren't sure about any of the terms, make it absolutely clear in the contract that those terms are up for future negotiation and will be written and signed separately.

If you have any questions about a contract, or want me to take a look at it, I would be happy to (I've written several performer contracts, and currently am involved with a law student organization that does advocacy work for musicians with music business legal problems). Get in touch with CDSS and we can put you in touch with David.